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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, March 30, 1942

SUBJECT: "HOW TO MAKE LEATHER LAST." Information from chemists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Today let's talk about leather, especially about ways to save leather--make it wear and last as long as possible. Let's talk especially about saving leather in shoes, because shoe leather has become especially valuable lately. No doubt you have heard that on the twelfth of March, just past, the Government's War Production Board ordered 80 percent of top-grade leather soles set aside for military shoes. Eighty percent for the manufacture and the repair of footwear for our armed forces!

Apparently our army experts take seriously the old saying that an army is only as good as its feet. Anyway, each soldier, when he's inducted, gets 3 pairs of shoes and then 2 pairs more during his first year in service. That means 5 pairs of shoes a year for every man on average duty. Then every man on more active duty gets more shoes, as he needs them. Now multiply 5 pairs of shoes by a million and a half--the number of men in our army last October--and you'll get 7 million 200 thousand pairs, or 14 million 400 thousand shoes. This will give you some idea of the leather going for military purposes these days, but only a partial idea, for our army now is much larger than it was last October and uses many more shoes. And shoes are only part of the story anyway. The Army uses leather also for belts, gloves, straps, scabbards for guns and bayonets, saddles and so on. And don't forget the Navy. More shoes, gloves, belts, straps and so on for the Navy.

You can see why every civilian needs to know how to keep and care for any leather articles he has, especially shoes, of course, but also leather gloves, belts, handbags, luggage, jackets and coats, books bound in leather, leather-covered furniture, saddles, harnesses--and anything else of leather.

Chemists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture advise that the way to make leather last--the way to keep it strong, soft, and pliant is to lubricate and polish. The kind of oil, or grease, or wax you use depends on the leather. Getting leather wet takes out some of its natural oil and leaves it dry, stiff and hard. Mud is especially hard on leather. Mud not only makes it hard and dry but stains it as well.

So at this season of April showers keep shoes out of the mud and rain if you can. If you can't, remember never to let mud dry on shoes. Wipe it off as soon as possible. Here's how the chemists suggest caring for wet shoes. First, wash off all mud and grit with warm but not hot water. Then rub oil or grease into the leather. Yes, rub it into the leather while the leather is still wet, to prevent it from drying stiff and hard. Next, stuff the shoes with soft crumpled paper to hold them in their proper shape and also absorb moisture on the inside. Finally, set the shoes to dry on a folded newspaper in a dry place where it's not too warm. Never let shoes dry near a hot fire, a stove, or a radiator. Too much heat can ruin leather. And leather scorches very much more easily when it is wet than when it is dry. One more point about wet shoes. Don't put them on until they are thoroughly dry. Wet leather is soft and weak. It pulls out of shape easily. And it tears, cuts and wears out easily.

Now, since lubricating keeps leather soft, strong and pliant, no doubt you'd like to know the best kind of oil or grease to use on shoes--or any other leather articles. The chemists say that depends on the article and the kind of leather. Street shoes or best shoes don't need much greasing, except when they get wet. Keep street shoes in condition by polishing with shoe polish. If they get wet, you can rub them with a little castor oil. (That's the only kind of oil you can use shoe polish over.)

But heavy shoes for farming or gardening need plenty of greasing to make them last. They have to endure moisture and mud day after day--and other things hard on leather. They won't stand up without plenty of lubricating. You can use several

different oils for heavy outdoor shoes. Neat's foot oil is good. So is castor oil, cod oil, tallow, wool grease or mixtures of these. Have the grease just slightly warm, and put it on the shoe with a soft cloth. Then rub it in thoroughly with the palm of the hand. It will protect shoes against mud, water, drying, heat and dirt. And it will protect shoes against other things that damage the leather--perspiration, for example. Perspiration has ruined many a good pair of shoes to say nothing of leather jackets, belts, and gloves. But oiling and polishing leather helps keep perspiration from sinking in.

Not only perspiration, but other acids or alkalies can damage leather. Farm and work shoes often get ruined by the lime used on lawns, fields and gardens. And they are often ruined by Portland cement, or by lye used in soap-making. Keep leather away from these damaging substances if possible. If not, clean them off at once, and keep leather so well lubricated that they can't do much damage.

Now here are a couple of questions housewives often ask about leather. One is: "Can you lubricate leather-covered furniture?" The answer is: Yes, with special leather polish, or with castor oil. But you have to take great care not to use too much of the polish or oil, and then to rub every trace into the leather. Otherwise, you may find grease spots on your clothes.

One more question: "Can you clean leather by washing with soap and water?" The answer is: Yes, if you wash it before you lubricate or polish it. Use mild pure soap or saddle soap, and as little water as possible. Wipe the soap off with a damp cloth. Then dry thoroughly, and rub on the oil or polish.

That's all the tips on saving leather for today.

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